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Learning English in Catalonia: beliefs and emotions through small stories and iterativity

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The aim of this study is to unveil English learners' beliefs and emotions regarding the English language education received in Catalan schools. For that purpose, data from 5 focus groups with 31 university students have been analysed through a combination of MCA and small stories analysis. The findings reveal that the participants are dissatisfied with the English language education provided, and they believe that the teachers and/or the system are to blame for their (low) level of English. In the main story analysed, boredom, demotivation, irritation and frustration are emotions attached to English learning in high school, which are also present in most of our subjects' small stories; it is the repetition (iterativity) of small stories, beliefs and emotions across participants that leads us to the detection of a discourse of victimhood, by which students identify themselves as the victims of their English teachers and/or the education system.

Keywords: learners' beliefs; learners' emotions; MCA; positioning; small stories; iterativity

Introduction

English is one of the central subjects in the Catalan curriculum of both primary and secondary education. Precisely due to its relevance, the education system has had –and still has– to face controversies about required standards for the students and teachers, the weight of grammar, the assessment of English and the best ways of preparing and training teachers, among other aspects. It seems thus that English teaching in Catalonia is still a challenge and despite the continuous research and the attempts of improving the situation, the results obtained by Catalan students in international EFL tests are, on average, low (Arnau & Vila, 2013). In order to understand (at least in some measure) why the learners' results are insufficient, it is fundamental to study the beliefs held and the emotions experienced by students, as these two factors exert a significant impact on their learning process and progress (Aragao, 2011; Barcelos, 2000; Pekrun et al., 2002). Listening to students' voices is a valuable resource to assess English teaching/learning in Catalonia (or elsewhere) and to gain insight into the way the educational system works, at least, from the learners' perspective.

In this line, this study aims to explore the participants' emotions attached to the English language lessons received so far and to reveal their beliefs regarding: (1) who (or how) they are as English students, (2) who (or how) their English teachers are as teachers, and (3) the role which the education system plays in the overall situation. We have selected an excerpt in which two small stories appear, one as a consequence of the other, and they have been analysed through a combination of Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA henceforth) (Sacks, 1972) and 3-level Positioning Analysis (or Narrative Positioning) in small stories; these, in contrast to “big stories”, can be defined as “underrepresented narrative activities” (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 129). De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2011, p. 162) argue that in research of narratives “there has been a long-standing tradition of investigating how

socioculturally available —capital D— discourses (...) are drawn upon by tellers in order to make sense of themselves over time and of the defining events that have happened to them”. In our study, tellers refer to and reflect upon their past English-learning experiences in high school and emphasise the role played by their teachers and by the education system in the outcome of the process, which they tend to describe as insufficient and unsatisfactory. On numerous occasions, they do so through small stories, which are employed as the link to social discourses; therefore, the analysis of these stories is key to understand (at least to some degree) their beliefs but also to grasp the emotions that a certain learning situation or experience aroused in them. In point of fact, De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2008, p. 384) claim that “narratives need to be studied as texts that get transposed in time and space, that (re)produce and modify current discourses”. They might be small, locally-relevant stories, but they tend to echo social discourses that can be reproduced or challenged.

The main stories analysed in this paper are only examples of the dominant discourse; however, these stories should not be understood as isolated narratives by a few individuals: there are multiple small stories across focus groups and across participants which make evident the power and the ubiquity of the circulating discourse. This repetition of (a type) of small story is what Georgakopoulou (2013) calls “iterativity”; nevertheless, she employs the concept in her studies to refer to the repetition of a certain type of story by a particular teller in a given situation. However, we would like to argue that “iterativity” can also be understood as the repeated presence of a “type of story”, like Georgakopoulou claims, across several tellers in a similar context (for a similar approach see De Fina, 2013). Our interest dwells thus in exploring how participants use small stories interactively and iteratively to construct a sense of who they

are as English learners by displaying beliefs and emotions related to English learning experiences.

Learning English from a sociocultural approach: beliefs and emotions

Learning is much more than a cognitive process. Despite the apparent triviality of this statement, the “social” was perceived as secondary to the “cognitive” within the field of Second Language Acquisition for a long time. Scholars like Block (2003) called for a social turn in the field, and studies like Norton’s (2000) or Miller’s (2003) showed how the social context in which learning occurs is fundamental to account for the progress (or lack thereof) in the learning process. By way of illustration, Norton’s (2000) research shows that immigrant women with low-status jobs living in Canadian neighbourhoods where languages other than English dominate have limited opportunities to practise English. This social context also contributes to undermining their self-confidence and to producing high levels of anxiety in them. In situations like these, the “social” is, without a doubt, more relevant than the “cognitive”.

This study explores some learners’ beliefs and emotions, and thus tackles an important element of this social and affective aspect of learning. Emotions and beliefs sit somehow in between the social and the cognitive, in the sense that biological processes mediate beliefs and emotions but do not determine them; rather, beliefs and emotions are shaped by sociocultural processes and factors (Ratner, 2000) and, in turn, can be shared socially (becoming “Discourses”). In the same vein, Peng (2011, p. 315) points out that language learning “does not happen in a culture-vacuum context and learner beliefs are born out of particular sociocultural contexts”. We consider that beliefs and emotions influence each other and that

they are intimately linked with learning contexts and the ever-changing nature of learners as human beings. In this study, beliefs and emotions are conceptualised as elements that every student brings to the class and which they construct, reconstruct and update continuously as human beings inside and outside the classroom. In fact, several studies (see Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Peng, 2011; Riley, 2009) show that beliefs change throughout students' interactions with their peers, teachers and other contextual circumstances.

Barcelos (2000) defines "beliefs" as a way of viewing the world which provides the confidence to act in a certain way towards matters accepted as true, but which might be questioned in the future. Learner beliefs are a multifaceted and complex concept (Peng, 2011) and were originally explored as relatively stable mental representations, thus focusing on their cognitive dimension. Nonetheless, from a sociocultural perspective, beliefs are regarded as emergent, dynamic, socially constructed and dependent on the context. Focusing now on the emotional aspect, emotion has been given much less importance and attention than cognition in western tradition. However, Ratner (2000, p. 6) maintains that "dichotomizing emotions and thinking and attributing them to different processes" is a fundamental error, and argues that "emotions are feelings that accompany thinking. They are the feeling side of thoughts; thought-filled feelings; thoughtful feelings. Emotions never exist alone, apart from thoughts". Integrated into cognition, emotions are as cultural as thinking is, and these thoughtful feelings can be, although not necessarily, connected to expressive reactions (like smiling or frowning) and bodily reactions (sweating or secretion of hormones).

Emotions, like beliefs, are dynamic processes and are connected to beliefs and actions which can be perceived in the context of the classroom. This means that self-esteem and emotions such as embarrassment or shyness can be related to and are influenced by beliefs students have about themselves and the environment; for instance, the feeling of being embarrassed about speaking in front of the class might be originated by the belief that a

classmate will laugh at one's performance (Aragao, 2011). Similarly, Miccoli (2008) reported how some of her participants avoided speaking because of fear of criticism and envisaged the classroom as a judgmental environment which hinders learners' oral participation. These emotions are linked to beliefs such as "other people know more than I do", that is, a belief of inferiority. Aragao's (2011) study demonstrates the importance of being immersed in a learning context where learners are not afraid of judgement and without subscribing to idealized models. Likewise, Yoshida (2013) expresses that both learners and their contributions need to feel validated, accepted and appreciated by others so that they can have social and psychological security using the language.

To have knowledge of the students' beliefs and emotions is crucial because, as Barcelos (2000) argues, these elements have considerable importance in language learning since they tend to shape students' (and also teachers') perceptions and to influence their actions and behaviour in the classroom. Consequently, Aragao (2011) encourages the teachers to build rapport with their students and to provide conditions which facilitate learning (i.e. "learning affordances") in order to foster positive academic emotions and beliefs and to create an agreeable learning environment.

Learning English in Catalonia: theory vs. practice

In order to understand and correctly interpret our participants' stories, beliefs and emotions, we need to take into consideration English language education in the Catalan context. Catalonia is a bilingual autonomous community of Spain, with both Catalan and Spanish as official languages. In schools, Catalan is the language of instruction, although Spanish must be employed in at least one fourth of the total number of subjects (Vallespín, 2014). Regarding

foreign languages, every educational centre has the right to determine the first and second foreign languages that will be taught; nonetheless, 99% of schools teach English as the first foreign language, while only 1% of them choose to teach French or German (Departament d'Ensenyament, 2015). The total number of hours per week devoted to the first foreign language is three during the six years of Secondary Education. Additionally, the language policy change in January 2014 stipulates that students who started a university degree in the academic year 2014-2015 or later must certify, upon completing their studies, the CEFRL B2 level of English, French, German or Italian (DOCG, 2014). Although English is not the only option, article 211 of this law dictates that students should access university with competences in third languages, especially in English. This reality demonstrates that the Catalan society acknowledges and also reinforces the status of English as a global language.

An important element of this context is the apparent discrepancy between the legal framework and the every-day reality in English language learning. The Catalan curriculum of foreign languages (DOGC, 2015) is competence-based and adopts a communicative approach. It offers some guidelines of the contents, some sample activities and some ways in which they can be assessed, but it also provides teachers with the freedom to choose the methodology, the materials and the activities to be used in class. It sets as the main goal that students know how to communicate in various languages and in several contexts with different speakers, and that they know how to face real-life situations in an autonomous and critical way.

Despite these guidelines, a communicative approach does not seem to be the rule across Catalan high schools. Aguilar (2003)'s paper, written from the perspective of an English Inspector from the Catalan Education Department, stressed that although the teaching of English had improved in comparison to a few decades before, the reality was that structural syllabuses were still used in the vast majority of classrooms and, subsequently, the limelight was on teaching grammar. The author also highlighted that learners were exposed to a limited

sample of language, and that the pedagogical materials and classroom procedures were designed to focus on the form of the language. She strongly criticised, thus, that even though some grammar clarifications might be useful at some point, such traditional approaches relied heavily on (i) linguistically simplified teaching materials; (ii) explicit grammar explanations; and (iii) error correction. The approach still relies on the notion that students automatically learn what is taught in class, so students are asked for immediate production of the units previously taught: “having practised the present perfect tense followed by *for* and *since*, the teacher administers a test to check acquisition of the structure” (Aguilar, 2003, p. 2).

A more recent study, Tragant et al. (2014)’s, points in the same direction. The study focused on the six Catalan high schools with the best results in the university entrance exam, and the researchers found that the reason for their success lied on classroom management issues (high level of exigency, time management and lack of discipline problems). However, in terms of teaching methodology, these schools did not seem to differ from less successful schools: individual work; teacher-centered lessons; the textbook-based educations; and many more written than speaking activities. The authors remark that some methodological aspects employed in these high schools do not coincide with the recommendations found in the literature on good practice and, on the whole, there is no evidence that the methodological aspects constitute a determining success factor in the high schools analysed. If we view the results in the English test among 4th ESO students (secondary school) in Catalonia in 2016, we see that there has been an improvement over previous years; however, results also show that 34% of students still have a low/medium-low level of the language (CSASE, 2016a). In

the case of 6th grade students (primary school), 39% have a low/medium-low competence of English, and the outcomes were slightly inferior to former years (CSASE, 2016b).

The study: data and methodological aspects

The data used in this study were gathered during December 2013 by means of five focus groups—coded FG1 to FG5— with a total of 31 participants, distributed in groups of five to seven people. The participants were year-one students of the degree in Audiovisual Communication and Journalism from a Catalan university and the group discussions were an evaluative item of one subject. Thus, although the participants and the moderator share the L1, which is Catalan, the discussions were conducted in English in order to assess their competence in the language. The group discussions were video-recorded and the duration of the whole exam was approximately one hour. For the present study, only 20-35 minutes of each conversation have been considered, which correspond approximately to the time students spent sharing their experiences in English language education. The conversations from the focus groups were transcribed using VOICE transcription conventions. We have used pseudonyms in order to preserve the informants' anonymity, and the names of two high schools which appear in the transcript have been replaced by HS1 and HS2.

Narrative is an imprecise concept which has been understood more generally as a way of making sense of the world, and, more moderately, as a particular type of discourse (Georgakopoulou, 2007). In order to analyse this “type of discourse”, we have decided to employ a method which fusions MCA and Positioning Analysis (or Narrative Positioning). Deppermann (2013) compared positioning analysis and MCA and, despite considering that positioning goes beyond MCA, he concluded that “membership categorisation analysis is a

core element of positioning” (Deppermann, 2013, p. 129). Our study hence analyses categories constructed sequentially and interactionally, for which Positioning Analysis is fundamental, and share Wilkinson and Kitzinger’s (2003) view that positioning analysis has to make use of MCA (and conversely). MCA was developed by Harvey Sacks (1972) in order to analyse the way members of society use categories (i.e. classifications) to organise and understand the social world. In Sacks’ (197, p. 330) famous example “the baby cried, the mommy picked it up”, he wondered why everyone understands that it is the baby’s mommy who picked it up. He suggested that categorization is fundamental to understand the statement and proposed an apparatus which allowed a comprehension of “what was going on”. Said apparatus is composed of membership categorization devices (MCD), i.e. collections of categories, such as “family”, which includes the categories of “mommy” and “baby”, and the notion of category-boundedness, that is, activities bound to certain categories (for instance, “crying” is a category-bound activity —CBA— of the category “baby”). Apart from CBAs, Watson (1978) proposed category-bound predicates (CBPs), for he considered that categories not only have correlated activities, but also rights, obligations, features, knowledge, attributes, etc. (Roca-Cuberes, 2008). We understand that it is the baby’s mommy who picked it up because they are members of the same MCD and that one of the activities that mothers (are supposed to) do is picking up their babies when they cry. The MCA apparatus is a member’s, not an analyst’s, apparatus, as it is a set of interpretive practices used by a member to understand and construct social realities within a specific interactional framework (Roca-Cuberes, 2008).

The second analytical tool, Narrative Positioning, derives from Bamberg’s (1997) proposal of the 3-level analysis model in narratives, more concretely, in small stories. The term “small stories” originated in opposition to the prototypical narrative analysis model proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1967), which led to the creation of a narrative canon, and, as a consequence, to several assumptions on, for instance, what a story is or what structure and

components it has. As De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2008) remark, this definition of narrative has led to the understanding of narratives as well-organized texts (structurally, chronologically and spatially) of a highly tellable event, i.e. life-stories or autobiographical accounts, usually in the form of monologues and as replies to (interviewer's) questions. These "big stories/narratives" have been explored contextless, which means that the situated talk and activity have not been taken (much) into account. The study of small stories started thus as an "antidote formulation" (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 129); as this author explores, in her data there were some small stories which fulfilled the prototypical canon criteria, but some others failed to do so; however, as she claims, not considering them as stories would overlook its social significance and omit the tellers' understandings of their (social) world. Small stories are defined by the author (2006, p. 129) as "underrepresented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell".

Going back to Narrative Positioning, Bamberg (1997) proposed a method to apply to storytelling the notion of "positioning", defined by Davies and Harré (1990, p. 48) as "the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent storylines". Bamberg (1997) proposed three levels of analysis: level 1 analyses the storyworld (how the teller is positioned vis-à-vis the characters of the story); level 2 explores the here-and-now of interaction, that is, the positioning in an interactional event between the teller and the interlocutors; and level 3 inquiries into how the teller (his/her Self) positions him/herself vis-à-vis societal Discourses. Particularly important for our current research is the concept of "iterativity" (Georgakopoulou, 2013), comprised within this last level, that allows us to see "what tends to happen in those two levels of positioning [1 and 2] in a particular type of stories told over and over by the same teller in similar sites" (Georgakopoulou, 2013, p. 103). Nevertheless, our attempt is to show that "iterativity" can also be understood and applied

when resembling stories are recited by different tellers in similar situations in which shared beliefs or discourses are exposed.

Findings

In our dataset, we encounter several small stories in which the tellers as students and their English teachers are the protagonists. In the selected excerpt two stories appear, the second (Clàudia's) as a consequence of the first (Yolanda's). When the moderator asks "do you think that English education in Catalonia works?", participants do not need to bring up stories to respond, and yet some of them do. The fact that they answer with stories indicates their willingness to approach the topic from a more intimate perspective, one which implicates themselves more personally (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). As De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2008) point out, when telling stories, tellers perform numerous social actions, for instance putting forward an argument (Yolanda) or challenging the interlocutor's views (Clàudia). Nevertheless, the actual aim of using stories here is to provide a persuasive explanation that can justify their little progress in English during the years of instruction and to present the teachers and/or the education system as the culprits of this situation in order to save their own face.

Excerpt 1

- 1 Daniel I think I agree tha:t (.) in genera:l (.) a bad education (.) of English. (.) and
if you for example do:n't (1) don't study in a (.) academy of English you

don't learn (1) English. (.) but in the school there are bad level I think.

<Mercè and Clàudia nod>

2 Moderator do you think that the teachers have a bad level or <1>that the level</1> is bad in general?

3 Mercè <1>no: </1>

4 Joanna <1>no</1>

5 Daniel +e+ t-the level that the teachers +e:+

6 Moderator (2) teach?

7 Daniel teach (.) yes. <nods>

8 Moderator it's bad? <Mercè nods>

9 Yolanda I'm agree because it's not about the teacher (.) is not about what the teacher knows (.) is about how they try to make you: understand (.) make you speak (.) I mean I was last year in [HS1] and the teacher enters to the class and (.) hi boys hi girls. +e+ present simple\ (.) <fast> I am you are he is she is. </fast>

10 All @@ <Clàudia nods>

11 Yolanda and I was like <loud> oh my God </loud> I don't understand it (.) when I was five years old I was learning it and now still learning it. (.) I don't know. (.) I mean we don't speak (.) if you try to speak the teacher says

<fast> [puts an angry face] okay shut up I don't have time I gotta go
</fast> or...

12 Clàudia and what about the program they have? (.) they have a paper that says you
have to teach this (.) this to the:

13 Yolanda yeah. <nods>

14 Moderator do you think that the paper says you have to teach present simple?

15 Yolanda no.

16 Clàudia we:ll (0.5) I think some papers do. (.) I mean some some lessons are just
essential for every course. (.) I mean I went to [HS2] and my teacher wa:s
was bri:lliant. (.) +e+ she: she knew a lot of English (.) but the classes
were really low were really poor (2) that's because she knows she's
supposed to teach thi:s and that.

17 Moderator do you think that the government should improve that?

18 Clàudia yeah.

19 Moderator OK. because what they have to do is not the thing (.) right?

20 Clàudia yes. because if they sta:rted from the very beginning (.) when you are a
chi:ld

21 Yolanda yeah.

22 Clàudia improving the: (.) the leve:l (.) not only repeating and doing past simple
activitie:s. <participants laugh>

23 Daniel yes.

24 Yolanda (2) but maybe: (.) I think I think +e+ it's the the life of the teacher (.) I
mean they are really bored explaining and if you don't like it what a- why
are you working there? I mean you are a teache:r (.) an English teacher (.)
it's <looks around and raises the brow> (.) it's <loud> supposed </loud>

you like to: teach people a:nd speaking in English a:nd making them feel
(.) better and fee:l <1>so excited </1>...>

25 Moderator <1>Good. </1> (.) OK. so do you think this has to do with the insecurity
of the teacher?

26 Yolanda not insecurity. (.) it's like they are tired of always teaching the same and
they go to the class and they say OK today this this and this and bye <snaps
her finger> go to home (.) if you like to do somethi:ng (.) you like to do it
with energy (.) with... <grimaces>

Level 1: Yolanda's story and the "present-simple teacher"

The selected episode occurs in 28m 55s of FG1. In turn 1, Daniel states that "in the school there are bad level" and that unless students attend language schools, they do not learn. The moderator, however, wants Daniel to specify whether it is the teacher or the students who have a bad level of English. By doing this, she is alluding to a category of the MCD "types of teachers": "the bad-level teacher". Mercè and Joana reject the relevance of this category (although it is significant in other episodes), and Daniel clarifies that the problem is not the level they have, but the level they teach.

At this point, Yolanda aligns with Daniel since, according to her, the problem is not what the teachers know (their level), but the way they have of teaching. To make the explanation even clearer, she resorts to a small story. In her tale, she shares a memory of an episode which was probably quite recurrent in her English lessons (she says "the teacher *enters*", which may imply a routine). The setting is the tellers' high school, HS1, the previous year, and the characters are 17-year-old Yolanda, 5-year-old Yolanda, her classmates and her English teacher. In the story, the teacher enters the room greeting the students with "hi boys,

hi girls” and then directly moves on to teaching the present simple tense. The teller’s emphasis on this short time lag between the greeting and the grammatical explanation reflects the teacher’s excessive interest in grammar. We have labelled this type of teacher “present-simple teacher” (within the “types of teachers” MCD), based on the way most informants describe their English teachers’ lessons. This type of teacher is constructed in Yolanda’s story as performing the following CBAs: “teaches a lot of grammar”, “provides the same grammatical explanations repeatedly course after course”, and “hushes the students”, for s/he allegedly does not allow them to speak in class. One of the main characters of this story, 17-year-old Yolanda, recollects an episode from a younger self: when she was 5 years old, she was already taught the present simple tense, and the character is portrayed remembering that episode with shock and disbelief (in turn 11 she exclaims “Oh my God I don’t understand it”). It sounds like an epiphany: she realizes that something is wrong with English language teaching. A CBPs for this type of teacher would be “is in a hurry” and therefore does not have time (or interest) to listen to the students when the class is over.

Although the small story ends in turn 11, Yolanda continues constructing the present-simple teacher. In turn 22, she attempts to provide an explanation for why this type of teachers is ineffective. She claims that it has to do with their life: they do not enjoy being teachers and therefore their demotivation can be perceived in the way they develop the lessons. In the description of the character above, we have already provided a list of CBAs and CBPs; two new predicates for the members of this category are: “they do not like their job”; and they “are really bored explaining”. In the same turn, Yolanda adds another predicate closely related to the previous one, which is “is tired of always teaching the same”. Just after that, Yolanda expresses that “if you like to do something (.) you like to do it with energy with...”, which reinforces the idea that the present simple teacher is bored and tired. In turn 22, Clàudia adds another category-bound activity to the “present-simple teacher”, which is “always repeats the

same grammar activities”. By enumerating the characteristics of the “present-simple teacher”, Yolanda and Clàudia are concurrently presenting the opposite category: the “effective teacher”. What provides the clue for intuiting a new category is Clàudia’s statement in the subjunctive mood: “because if they started from the very beginning (.) when you are a child” (turn 20). This reveals a belief about what, according to this participant, an ideal or effective teacher would do in the classroom in order to ensure a fruitful learning process to the students. Thus, according to Clàudia, category-bound activities of the “effective teacher” would be: “helps students improve their level since childhood” and “does not repeat the same grammar activities”.

Level 2: expressing emotions and negotiating discourses

One of the main focal points in this study is the emotions displayed by the participants with respect to their experiences in the English classroom. Since Yolanda is the main speaker, our attention has been directed to what emotions related to the classroom context she expresses and how. Although we cannot analyse the *real* emotions felt in class, we can somehow have access to them in the here-and-now of telling: when she is telling her story, she is in a way reliving the emotions she experienced in class and expressing them in talk, probably consciously in order to make her story more genuine. According to Niemeier and Dirven (1997, p. 250), direct speech has the capacity to “represent emotive-affective features of the ‘original’ utterance”. In fact, it is especially during these passages of direct speech when Yolanda reveals more evidently her emotions towards the situation: when she is reciting the present simple, she moves her head mechanically like a robot, and her facial expressions clearly show boredom and demotivation. These negative “academic emotions” (Pekrun et al., 2002) are probably the emotions that she felt (or feels) when studying grammar, and probably also the expression that

17-year-old-Yolanda remembers on the teacher's face while explaining repeatedly the same grammatical structure. In fact, as we mentioned before, she explicitly mentions that "the teacher is really bored explaining".

In the second direct quotation, she places her hands with the palms to the front, in a way that indicates "stop" or "keep a distance", which helps to convey her idea that this type of teacher's concern is giving the lesson and leaving the class without minding the students' needs. Additionally, she drastically changes her neutral facial expression into a rather irritated or angry one. During these direct quotations, her speech rate increases and her voice tone changes: in the first impersonation, it is monotone and flat, whereas in the second one, it is more aggressive, conveying anger. These emotions are evoked again afterwards, in turn 24, by the same speaker but outside her small story. She claims that the teachers "are really bored explaining", which matches the bodily expression of the emotion identified in the first direct quotation; at the end of the turn, she states that an English teacher is supposed to "make [the students] feel better", which is connected to the second direct quotation in which the teacher is portrayed as unwilling to build rapport with the students. The fact that Yolanda draws the attention to the lack of rapport is key to understand her complaint and the frustration or irritation that she felt (and apparently still feels) in the English class because she perceived that her teacher did not care about her.

Yolanda's imitation of her "present-simple teacher" makes the other participants laugh (turn 10), which seems to indicate that they share her position, as they have had similar experiences. However, Clàudia aligns only partially with Yolanda's statement: she positions in favour of the idea that there is an excess of grammar teaching in the classroom, but disagrees in that it is not completely the teacher's fault: the "program", or "paper" (turn 12), i.e. the curriculum, which is designed by the educational authorities and must be followed by teachers, is also to blame. By doing so, Clàudia adds another predicate to the "present-simple teacher"

category: “follows a program that tells him/her to teach grammar”. There is, however, a negotiation of this predicate, and this negotiation is vital: in turn 13, Yolanda initially accepts this predicate and therefore admits that the overabundance of grammar is not completely the teacher’s fault; however, when the moderator asks “do you think that the paper says you have to teach present simple?” (turn 14), Yolanda misaligns with Clàudia again and returns to her initial position. Yolanda’s shifting between positions may result contradictory; yet, the explanation could be that, at first, she agrees with Clàudia about the existence of a curriculum which the teachers have to follow. Nevertheless, after the moderator’s question, Yolanda realizes —probably due to the moderator’s tone of incredulity— that the curriculum is not as specific, and therefore that it is the teacher’s choice to devote so much time to grammar. For her part, Clàudia does not change her mind, but somehow softens her position by saying “well” and “*some* papers do” in order to save her face. Her conclusion is that some lessons are simply essential, implying that grammar must be studied anyway.

In turn 16, Clàudia uses a story to argue her point. Having listened to Yolanda’s story, in which English teachers are depicted from an overwhelmingly negative perspective, Clàudia comes to their rescue by sharing her own experience. In Clàudia’s story, set in her high school —HS2—, her former English teacher, described as “brilliant”, appears; for the teller, being a “brilliant” English teacher means being proficient in English. The teacher’s lessons, however, are described as “low” and “poor”. What is remarkable here is that this informant believes that “brilliant teachers” are transformed into “present-simple teachers” because they have this program which they must follow, and, as a consequence, their lessons are “low”. The teacher in this case is not constructed as the antagonist or as the culprit causing problems for the students, as happened in story 1. In this story, the teacher is portrayed in a position of victimhood and trouble, and, as a consequence, so are her students. Thus, English teachers are represented as being subjugated to the power of the curriculum, which is designed by education

authorities, and therefore they have little say in what and how to teach. As Clàudia states in turn 12, before she tells her story, the curriculum “says you have to teach this (.) this to the students”, and, subsequently, her English teacher, despite being “brilliant”, “knows she’s supposed to teach this and that”.

There is certainly a clash of discourses, which was already made evident in the negotiation of the predicate “follows a program that tells him/her to teach grammar”. Whereas Clàudia seems to believe that the presence of a curriculum which stipulates grammar teaching is essential to understand and justify the existence of the “present-simple teacher” category, Yolanda—despite her momentary alignment with Clàudia—refuses to evade the teachers from any responsibility. This disagreement in the inclusion of this predicate points to a different understanding of the category. This level 2 positioning is crucial because it helps not only to identify the participants’ discourses, but also to comprehend them in the specific context in which the discourse construction takes place. Through her contribution, Clàudia brings to the fore the question of “who is to blame?”, and both Yolanda and Clàudia—probably under a certain influence of the moderator—negotiate and attempt to provide an answer to this question. The emergence of these two stories makes sense in and only because of the here-and-now of telling, that is, the very moment of interaction.

Level 3: the Discourse of victimhood

We have analysed how both Yolanda and Clàudia position themselves and their English teachers as characters in the storyworld (level 1), and how they position themselves in the interactive episode with their classmates and the moderator (level 2). In this final stage, we need to answer one big question: “who am I?”, or, more precisely, “who are *we*?”. Who are the tellers as (English) students and how do they position themselves and their English teachers

within their sociocultural context? In this excerpt, the participants provide information about themselves (and “their Selves”), but in the quest to discover who they are, our main focus is on the beliefs they display regarding: (1) who (or how) they are as English students, (2) who (or how) their English teachers are as teachers, and (3) the role that the education system plays in all this.

In the excerpt analysed, we have identified through the use of small stories two beliefs which two of the participants reveal. The first, displayed by Yolanda, is that students are the victims of teachers who are only concerned about providing grammatical explanations while ignoring the students’ needs. The second, as Clàudia argues, is that both students and teachers are the victims of the educational authorities, which are in charge of designing the curriculum. Although these beliefs are slightly different, they both point to a discourse of victimhood, by which English students are the victims of grammar-obsessed teachers and/or a flawed education system. The excerpt included here was only an instance to illustrate the students’ general discontentment with English learning. However, what is interesting to note is that all 31 participants of the focus groups expressed dissatisfaction with the methodology employed in the English lessons. Their main complaint is directed towards the excess of grammar teaching to the detriment of other more dynamic and communicative activities such as watching videos or films, listening to music and, above all, practising speaking skills. We found 28 episodes in which they complain about this issue, and they often do so by means of small stories with present present-simple teachers as protagonists, like Yolanda and Clàudia did:

Excerpt 2

Joana (FG1): when I stay in school (.) my English teachers +em+ (.) don’t let me to ta:lk
 and listen music and see: watch films (.) and this is so important to learn

(.) and not only grammar and vocabulary and (.) yes (.) it's importa:nt (.)
but the other too.

Excerpt 3

Míriam (FG2): I think that since I was five: (.) or three: the: the teachers just say this is a:
this is a pencil (.) vocabulary and grammar (.) but they didn't teach how
to use that vocabulary or how to use that grammar speaking (.) they only
teach the: writing and saying it's a lamp it's a window (.) or present
simple: I am (.) my name i:s

Excerpt 4

Gemma (FG3): When we speak English in class we feel unsafe and +e+ we are
embarrassi:ng (.) and nobody speak and teache:rs (.) grammar grammar
grammar.

Excerpt 5

Glòria (FG4): In secondary school I don't think it's a good process how they do it
beca:use they always do grammar (.) my teachers only did grammar
grammar gramma:r and always the same (.) and they didn't let students to
speak or things like that.

The characters of both the students and the teachers in most of the small stories are depicted in a way that is similar to Yolanda and Clàudia's: the teacher is presented as mainly carrying out grammar explanations and activities and very little speaking tasks, while the students portray themselves as being unable to learn or improve their English because of the

excess of grammar in the class, repetitive and uncommunicative activities, and little practice of the language. Moreover (and probably as a consequence), they relate exclusively negative emotions to the English learning setting; apart from demotivation, boredom, irritation and frustration, identified by Yolanda, participants also mention feelings of insecurity, fear and embarrassment. Other times, the participants show their disappointment through statements, hypothetical events and suppositions. A strategy which they employ on countless occasions is to express their loathing towards grammar by repeating the word three times, like Glòria and Gemma do.

Apart from the grammar, another key issue is teacher-student rapport, introduced by Yolanda, which is connected to the emotional climate of the classroom. Although this topic is not as recurrent as grammar, in the instances they refer to the relationship with their English teachers they do it in negatively, for instance:

Excerpt 6

Mireia (FG4): And the teachers were too different (0.5) he: only cares about the people who know some English and the othe:rs (.) when the teacher speaks and explains the lesson but the class don't understa:nd (.) he doesn't care (.) and the girl was very careful about everyone

With these set of isolated stories we can weave a web that enables us to construct a bigger picture, that is, the dominant discourse among some English students in Catalonia. This discourse of victimhood is grasped and made relevant thanks to an “iterativity” (Georgakopoulou, 2013) in the small stories analysed. Georgakopoulou (2013, p. 103) argues that scrutiny on iterativity permits us to gain insight into positioning levels 1 and 2 “in a particular type of stories told over and over by the same teller in similar sites”. Nonetheless, in

this research we have looked at a particular type of stories told not only by one teller, but by different tellers in similar contexts. This iterativity has allowed us to recognize (1) the emotions which the participants have experienced in the English class, (2) the shared beliefs about their English teachers, about themselves, and about the education system, and (3) the circulating discourse of victimhood that the participants (re)produce.

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study was to identify the beliefs and emotions of some English students with respect to their English language experience through MCA and narrative positioning in small stories. On the one hand, we have seen that due to the overabundance of repetitive grammar activities in the classroom, the emotions that prevail in our main participant, Yolanda, are demotivation and boredom. On the other, the teacher's reluctance to build rapport with the students arouses emotions of frustration and irritation in her due to the unpleasant experience she underwent learning English. In our case, we had students remembering (and somehow reliving) their English lessons and expressing emotions while talking about them. A further line would be to observe both students and teachers in action, experiencing the emotions *in situ*, and complementing this with emotion talk through interviews and focus group discussions, in which beliefs and discourses are likely to emerge.

As for the beliefs, our objective was to explore: (1) who (or how) the participants are as English students, (2) who (or how) their English teachers are as teachers, and (3) the role that the education system plays in all this. The students are presented as victims and claim that their little progress in English is mostly due to having "present-simple teachers". Yolanda attaches blame directly to this type of teachers, whereas Clàudia believes that the blame falls on the

curriculum, and, subsequently, on the education system, which instructs the teachers to do grammar in class. Our subjects display this discourse of victimhood by categorising their teachers and by engaging in narratives in which they depict themselves as bored, demotivated and frustrated. These negative emotions (and others like insecurity, embarrassment or fear), the “present-simple teacher” and the complaints about grammar issues are present across numerous episodes in the five focus groups. This iterativity helps us to construct a bigger picture of the

English learners' beliefs and emotions in a Catalan scenario and to understand what the problem with English education is from their viewpoint.

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